

THE FUSION OF ABSURDITY AND REALITY IN HAROLD PINTER'S

THE DUMB WAITER

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to break the shield of absurdity of *The Dumb Waiter* to unfold its latent realistic factors. *The Dumb Waiter* is the last out of three earliest plays by Pinter during 1957 that extremely possesses the Absurd Theatre traits. This Absurd Play that projects the life of two hired killers in one of their missions is highly flavored with realistic essence which mostly is in contradiction with Absurd Theatre principle. But due to the amalgam of absurdism and realism in Pinter's oeuvre, finding the realistic streaks in his works is not a tough task. Behind the thick layer of absurdity in *The Dumb Waiter*, the real characters with internal fears strive to depict the pathetic status of a powerless man in menacing atmosphere. Their vain struggle in protecting him before his powerful master dramatizes expertly in the real manner.

KEYWORDS: The Dumb Waiter, Absurd Theatre, Reality

INTRODUCTION

The Absurd Theatre is a dramatic movement or to be more exact “anti-literary” movement of our time” (Esslin 26) which was formed during 1950s-60s to “illustrates the fundamental helplessness of humanity”. (Rajeshwar 212) As claimed by Esslin this New Theatre was popularized by eminent absurdist dramatists such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet and others. One of the fundamental issues in creation of this movement was World War II, its chaos and people’s status after the war, which undoubtedly alters dramatists’ vision towards the universe and stimulates them to picture man as a helpless alien with the pitiable situation in this abominable world. Absurd Theatre’s trend is entirely against the Conventional Theatre and “whereas traditional theatre attempts to create a photographic representation of life as we see it, the Theatre of Absurd aims to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams” (Rajeshwar 211). According to this issue, Absurd Drama has more trend to surreal than real. In this regard, Harold Pinter as one of the prominent absurdist dramatists breaks this mere surreal and mingles it with reality. Since, Pinter’s concern is about the latent layers of individuals’ relationship; his attention is paid to the profound meaning of people’s words and action. With this vision, he fashions his new technique in Absurd Theatre and underlines the reality in his dramatic works.

Pinter’s dramatic works can be divided into three phases. The first phase of his writing consists the savor of absurdity and moreover, menace hovers all over his earliest plays. The second period is associated with more touches on past and memory and in the third phase his drama totally turns to political ones. But the notable point is that in all three phases Pinter always withholds reality in his works same as the constant reality in his political works which is called ‘political reality’.

Pinter was terribly influenced by Beckett and he explicitly claims “if Beckett’s influence shows in my work that’s all right with me. You don’t write in a vacuum: you’re bound to absorb and digest other writing and I admire Beckett’s work so much that something of its texture might appear in my own”. (Harold Pinter Replies: 1963) In this respect, Esslin in his article under the title of *Godot and His Children* considers Pinter as one of the children of Godot. He alludes “like Beckett, he is

essentially concerned with communication a ‘sense of being’, with producing patterns of poetic imagery … like Beckett, Pinter wants to communicate the mystery, the problematical nature, of man’s situation in the world”. (Esslin: 1963:140)

The influence of Becket’s *Waiting for Godot* is clearly discernable in *The Dumb Waiter* as the motifs of waiting and superior-inferior relationship on a different plane in both plays are the same. Furthermore, in *The Dumb Waiter* unlike Pinter’s previous works, he drops the female characters just like *Waiting for Godot*.

As *The Dumb Waiter* is classified in the first phase of Pinter’s writing, so the existence of menace, fear and uncertainty is unavoidable. *The Dumb Waiter* pictures two hit men, Ben and Gus, who are getting ready for their mission. They are waiting in a windowless basement room with two doors, one into outside, and the other into lavatory. Their passive action and their repetitive concept of their communication present them as the obedient puppets to their higher master. As the play proceeds, Gus boldly expresses his discontent with Wilson (their invisible master) and organization and eventually due to this impudence he is sentenced to death.

One of the significant points about *The Dumb Waiter* is the evolution of its characters and setting in Pinterian manner. We encounter with the descent procedure of setting in *The Dumb Waiter* since in Pinter’s previous works the room was respectively placed in upper stair and ground. But here the room is located in the basement where, Rose, the major character of Pinter’s *The Room*, even afraid to think about the basement, let alone to live there. Following this, Trussler employs this sentence of argument to Pinter’s setting development: “Pinter’s storey-by-storey explanation finally descends from that upper-floor Room, through the way of the ground-floor lounge of *The Birthday Party*, into the windowless and no doubt damp basement so feared by Rose Hudd”. (1974: 51)

The Dumb Waiter illustrates through two powerless gunmen the menacing situation of the human being before a higher power. Their inferior position, their lack of certainty, their present room and finally their lack of knowledge about their proximity all are an indication of their piteous status and defines them as the absurd modern men. The atmosphere of menace in this play encompasses the characters, tightly and the godlike figure dumb waiter intensifies the dreadful milieu by its cryptic menus.

Furthermore, despite being an Absurd Play some reviewers such as Gordon consider *The Dumb Waiter* as a post-modern morality play and in consequence Gus is regarded as a conscious modern man whose consciousness contributes to his death. He vividly declares “*The Dumb Waiter* can be viewed as a post-modern morality play, and the man who believes he has a consciousness must die”. (Gordon 210) the bitter reality of annihilation of conscious people in this cruel world with consideration of historical evidence was a common affair in all ages. In this regard, Pinter tactfully depicts this painful fact of the world through Gus.

DISCUSSIONS

The Dumb Waiter is furnished with several realistic factors such as real setting and characters, real menace, real uncertainty and real domination of real power. All these realistic elements highlight the amalgam of absurdum and realism in this play.

The Dumb Waiter’s setting is a bed-sitting windowless basement room which is decorated with two beds in a gloomy and heavy atmosphere. The setting and its furniture are all depicted in a highly realistic manner and one can see the essential stuff of domestic life. Pinter himself dramatizes the image of the room in the very beginning of the play as follows: “Scene: A basement room. Two beds, flat against the back wall. A serving hatch, closed, between the beds. A door to the kitchen and

lavatory, left. A door to a passage, right". (Pinter: 1957: 35)

Absurdist dramatists usually use surreal atmosphere alongside of unreal characters. Characters in Beckett, Ionesco, Jean Tardieu, Boris Vian or other absurdist dramatists are more eccentric than real and common since they mostly are pictured as dehumanization characters. Obviously Pinter never dehumanizes his characters and creates them as the real individuals in the world. Ben and Gus, *The Dumb Waiter*'s characters are not inhuman or uncommon, but very human and real. They are two professional assassins who struggle to stabilize their uncertain status. Ben by employing an imperative form of language tries to determine his position as Gus's senior and Gus keeps on questions Ben and organization to show his dissatisfaction of the status quo. So these two characters completely possess the quality of two wise men and they simply are the model for modern men in modern civilization.

Menace, the inseparable element of Pinter's works, casts its horror shadow over the play from its exact beginning and it is intensified by forwarding the play. Menace as one of the momentous elements in Absurd Theatre represents in *The Dumb Waiter* in a highly realistic manner. This real menace develops step by step and infiltrates overall the basement room insofar as the atmosphere gets suffocative. The echoes of menace resonates by an envelope's slide from under the door and come to its climax by the sudden descent of the dumbwaiter. Gus is more endangered of this palpable menace as he feels something is wrong with his partner. He guesses Ben knows more than him, that's why He barrages him with various questions:

Why did he send us matches if he knew there was no gas? ... Why did he do that? ... Who sends us those matches? ... Who is it upstairs? ... Who is it, though? ... I ask you a question ... I ask you before. Who moved in? I asked you. You said the people who had it before moved out. Well, who moved in? ... Well, what's he playing all these games for? That's what I want to know. What's he doing for?" (Pinter: 1957: 67-8)

Finally, not only he gets nothing, but his voice violently is repressed by "enough" and "shut up". Pinter dramatizes how lack of knowledge can be menacing in the world. Being amongst a group and having less knowledge in comparison with them is highly dangerous and threaten one's status. Less knowledge is equivalent with less power and less power means being threatened by a powerful master. Gus even has a sense of pity for their unknown target unaware of being a victim himself. He remarks "I hope the bloke's not going to get excited tonight, or anything" (Pinter: 1957: 59)

Besides, it is his lack of knowledge which makes him sink in death, because if he was aware of testing maybe he would behave himself and didn't stimulate his invisible powerful master to commands on his death. So Pinter subtly implies to the real fact of the world that the lack of knowledge signifies the lack of tranquility as if menace and awareness following someone, he can never live certain and easy. He has to escape and find a safe place in order to spend his rest of life, but there is no assurance of his safety as it exactly happens to Stanley in *The Birthday Party*. This is the reality of man's absurd life.

On the other hand, lack of knowledge places one in the lower level. In this case the superior-inferior relationship is formed between the individuals and clearly the superior one always is more powerful since knowledge is power. Thus the inferior person should obey his powerful superior without any complain and carries out his orders, even it is against his will, otherwise he encounters with serious problems such as Gus who lost his life. Gus's unawareness of his circumstances alters him to the man of questions. His inquiry about their job, situation, boss and organization or his consecutive complaints about everything makes Ben and consequently the audience crazy:

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for? That's what I want to know. What's he doing for?" (Pinter 67-8)

Uncertainty is another problematic matter in new civilized society that absurdist dramatists are exploited out of this fact in their works. People in our age constantly struggle with uncertainty. Gus and Ben as the representative of modern man picture this situation in the best way. For them nothing is certain. They are not certain about their real boss; they don't know the other agents and assignees of their organization. Gus, the intelligent one, is vague about who is cleaning after them. They don't learn about their object until the right moment of killing. They haven't a fixed place for themselves insomuch they have to perform organization's orders so they continuously are transferred to different places. Hence, uncertainty is woven with them and never let them alone.

Communication in *The Dumb Waiter* like other absurd plays is fractured. Basically simple, Ben and Gus are not able to communicate properly with each other as one of them intentionally has no desire to communicate. Ben amuses himself by reading newspaper and doesn't pay attention to Gus's speech. He shows his reluctance by his silence or once in a while by short answers. Besides, his short answers don't make any bridge to lead them in true communication as these answers are mostly irrelevant. For instance, when Ben is reading the news about the death of an old man, Gus asks how did it happen? Then, Ben replies him by repeating the news:

BEN. A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. But there was a lot of traffic, see? He couldn't see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry.

.....

GUS. Who advised him to do a thing like that?

BEN. A man of eighty-seven crawling under a lorry! (Pinter 36)

"In short, Gus and Ben have no long-standing, deeply felt commitments to anything. They believe nothing in particular. They take pleasure in nothing in particular". (Gordon 204)

However, his occasional answer is a sort of coating to cover the nakedness of his silence. In 1962 Pinter remarks in his speech at the National Drama Festival in Bristol that there are two kinds of fallen silences in his play, One is "a *literal* silence, when words are withheld for self-protection" (Jane Wong Yeang Chui 47) and "the second can be called an *implied* silence, and it takes the form of "a torrent of language." Here, words are also used for self-protection, but more significantly, they create a social veil". (Jane Wong Yeang Chui 47)

In *The Dumb Waiter* both silences are illustrated by Ben. Ben's silence is due to protecting himself of the probable danger by their invisible master as well as "is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness". Also, at the end of the play the two killers stare at each other via a long silence, a silence that occults "a torrent of language" behind it. So both aforementioned silences by Pinter take place in *The Dumb Waiter*.

Furthermore, silence as an inarticulate language, is employed by Pinter to show the absurdity of the individuals which can be considered as one of the mere reality of the modern society. Another aspect of silence "contributes to that social smoke screen we call decorum, tact, and consideration" (YeangChui: 2013: 47) In this respect, Friedrich Nietzsche's view upon vulnerability and sensibility of the individuals' social interaction is a great testimony to the real nature of his language: [Y]es, there are friends, but it is an error and deception regarding yourself that led them to you; and they must have learned how to keep silent in order to remain your friend" (*Human, All Too Human*: 1878: 148)

Repetitive action alongside repetitious phrase and sentence not only highlights one of the important hallmarks of the absurd Drama but asserts the repetitive life of characters. *The Dumb Waiter* portrays the monotonous and tedious life of Ben and Gus in the real way and indicates how menace and boring is their job. Their latter mission extremely impresses Gus and induces him to think profoundly about the aforesaid matters. In this regard, he shares his internal feeling with his mate: "you come into a place when it's still dark, you come into a room you've never seen before, you sleep all day, you do your job and then you go away in the night again ... Don't you ever get a bit fed up?" (Pinter: 1959: 40) But Ben who seemingly is satisfied with his position attacks him furiously by saying: "when are going to stop jabbering?" (Pinter: 1959: 41)

Gus cannot stop thinking about the girl who was murdered in their former mission and the memory of her, hunted him on and off: "I was just thinking about that girl, that's all ... She wasn't much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess though, wasn't it? What a mess. Honest, I can't remember a mess like that one. They don't seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like. Didn't she spread, eh? She didn't half spread. Kaw! But I've been meaning to ask you." (Pinter: 1959: 52-3) At the higher level of meaning girl's memory that tormented Gus, indicates his sensitive side and the sense of humanity which is not completely annihilated in him. This memory makes him awake of his long hibernation, so like a child boy he starts questioning everything around him that lastly terminates with his murder.

CONCLUSIONS

Though the Absurd Theatre is completely encompassed with eccentric characters and weird occurrence, but Pinter goes one step further and employs real characters as well as common concerns and fears of the individuals to fashion his dramatic works. In his works, words find another concept as they are employed to express another sense rather than their real meaning and one should focus on the occult meaning rather surface meaning.

In *The Dumb Waiter*, he makes use of two real professional killers in the frame of Absurd Play in order to depict the vanity and emptiness of modern man's life. Gus and Ben both portray the relentless reality of our universe where the power talks first. Pinter dramatizes the power in its real sense as it is presented in the real world. Gus as the powerless character on the analogy of Ben, is the mere victim. He also is the victim of his boldness and conscious before his invisible master.

As it is clean remarkable, Pinter expresses this point meticulously that how a powerless person should be inarticulate and cautious in the presence of powerful individual and accomplishes his desire without any complaint or discontent. Likewise, he demonstrates how the powerful invisible master can play his marionettes on his own desire and threats their world.

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